

Chapter IX

IDEAS AND THEIR BEHAVIOUR

BEFORE we go further I want to speak about that everyday word *idea*, in the technical use of which psychologists differ. Each writer has a good reason for his own conventional use of it, and if we know their various views we shall not only understand them better, but be better able to judge as to how we may use it ourselves.

268. *Lloyd Morgan* very definitely limits it to the concept:

‘I propose to use the term only for what are called general ideas, or abstract ideas.’ And further, ‘You can form *no image* of the idea as such. It refuses to be imaged save in its concrete examples.’

Adams agrees that this is the usual conventional use of the word.

In this case the ideational process would begin with the concept.

269. But *Titchener* as definitely associates *idea* with the *mental image*. Although twice on one page he speaks of a perception *or* idea (both being groups of sensations) he immediately points out the difference between them thus:

‘When we perceive, the object which arouses the sensation is actually before us, . . . whereas, when we have an *idea*, the object is not before us, but the sensations are set up inside the brain without any disturbance of the organs on the surface of the body.’ And again, ‘When I am looking at a table, as it stands in front of me, I perceive it; but if I shut my eyes and think of a table, or if some particular table comes into my head along with other memories . . . then I have an *idea* of a table, I ideate it.’

Here the ideational process starts with the image.

Stout also defines an *idea* as 'a significant mental image,' and adds, '*Ideas* compared with *percepts* possess a peculiar plasticity,' thus including ideal construction and images of fancy.

270. For *Wundt*, however, *idea* is applicable to all states of consciousness, and he resents any limitation of its meaning. He says:

'Even at the present time many psychologists use the word *idea* only for a complex that does not arise from direct outward impressions, i.e. only for so-called memory images. For ideas formed by outward sense impressions they generally use the word *perception*. Now this distinction is psychologically of absolutely no importance, since there are really no valid differences between memory ideas and so-called sense perceptions.'

His own use of the word he sets out very clearly:

'By an *idea* we shall understand that mental state or process which we refer to something outside of ourselves, whether the attribute of externality be thought of as directly applicable in the present' [this would include sensation and perception], 'or as applied to an object which has been directly given to us in the past' [the mental image], 'or even as applied to an object which is only possible, not actual' [i.e. born of our imagination]. 'Under *ideas*, therefore, we include: (a) Sense-perceptions, which depend on direct excitation of the organs of sense. (b) Memories of such perceptions. (c) Images of fancy, be they what they may.'

271. *James* would accept this, but that for him *idea* does not include bodily sensation. He says:

'We ought to have some general term by which to designate all states of consciousness merely as such, and apart

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from their particular quality or cognitive function. *Idea* is a good, vague, neutral word, and was by Locke employed in the broadest general way, but . . . it does not cover bodily sensations, and it has no verb.*

272. *Huxley*, who classed sensations along with emotions, volitions, and thoughts, under the common head of states of consciousness, would probably, if thinking psychologically, have accepted *idea* as covering all these.

273. So, whichever view we adopt, we shall find ourselves in good company. The practical question is, which convention will be most convenient to us as teachers? It is obvious that accurate discrimination and definition and terminology are necessary to clear thinking. But the teacher needs 'a good, vague, neutral word' that will cover all his pupil's mental processes; and for this purpose there is no term so handy as *idea*. No other term can fitly take its place. Even the most accurate thinker, when he writes for the man in the street, uses it in the most loose and general way, because in that way alone does the man in the street understand it. It is, in fact, an elusive term, and however carefully we may try to pin it to one meaning it is likely to escape from its shackles when it catches us napping. In its adaptability lies its usefulness. We can make it mean what we like, so long as we are quite clear as to what we do mean, what scope we give it, what meanings are given to it by other people, and what its special significance is in an accurately limited terminology.

* 'To *ideate*' has, however, come into common use.

274. We may each have a leaning towards one particular convention. Personally I incline to the view of Titchener and Stout: ruling out the *percept*—because our *percepts* disappear, while our *ideas*, our *images*, we carry about with us—and rejecting altogether Wundt's dictum that there is no valid difference between them. We must remember, too, that though children can and do generalize, and have concepts, they think mainly in images, and it is with the behaviour of the child mind that the teacher is concerned.

275. Now we have to consider how ideas behave when we have got them; for a good deal of our work as teachers consists in managing—so to speak—the ideas in our pupils' minds, and knowing how to add to them other ideas. In studying the behaviour of ideas we shall find Consciousness a better word than Mind, because we are apt to think of Mind as a sort of fixed quantity, while we are all aware that our consciousness is always changing. Not only does it seem to be more extended, or less, at times, but there is a constant change in the ideas that make it up, and in the grouping of these.

276. Psychologists use various figures of speech to represent this constant flux of ideas. The commonest of these is 'the field of consciousness,' something akin to the 'field of vision' in which one object occupies the centre or focus and others are more or less dimly perceived in the margin. But there is a difference. In the field of vision the objects may be fixed, as in a landscape, and if we wish to attend to something in the margin

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we have to turn our eyes in that direction. In doing so a new field of vision comes into our ken. Objects in the margin of the old field, or even outside it, may be brought into the centre of the new, and the focal object become marginal.

277. The notion of the field of consciousness is more like that of the kaleidoscope. The field of the kaleidoscope does not change, but there is a constant alteration in the coming and going and grouping of the objects within it, and it is a question whether the same exact grouping even appears twice. It is so with our thoughts. They come and go. 'Mind *now*' is not the mind of five minutes ago. Through the shifting of attention marginal and focal thoughts change places. Ideas that have disappeared for months or years suddenly flash into the field, the same—yet different, and bringing with them others that seem altogether new. Although our interests may be mainly centred in one subject our ideas about that subject alter considerably. Since you began to read this book your ideas about music teaching may be changing from day to day, from hour to hour.

278. The figure used by Professor James is not a 'field' but a 'stream' of consciousness. It has a past, a present, and even a future. Consciousness flows on, wave after wave. 'All ideas on the crest of the wave are said to be focal, while those in the body of the wave are said to be marginal or sub-conscious.'

279. Professor Adams, in his brilliant essay on the Herbartian psychology, furnishes us with

another figure. Referring to Herbart's theory that ideas are constantly either helping or hindering each other during our thinking processes, he likens consciousness to a dome, within which ideas struggle for a place at the summit, or focal point. As it will help us to understand a part of the Herbartian psychology which is of great practical use, I will quote from Professor Adams's cleverly worked out analogy. He personifies ideas and treats the soul as a place. You will recollect that Herbart used the term Soul instead of Mind (22).

280. 'According to Herbart, the ideas are always competing with each other for a place in the soul. But all places in the soul are not of equal value in the eyes of an idea. To use a somewhat gross comparison, the soul may be regarded under the figure of a dome, the summit of which is the goal of the ambition of every self-respecting idea. The summit is certainly the best place, but anywhere within the dome is good, and the nearer the summit of the dome the better. When an idea gets low down in the dome near the base it becomes dim and languid, and the nearer the base the more languid, till on the base it gasps for a while, and then either rises to higher and happier levels or sinks beyond the base altogether into the limbo of unconsciousness. The base of the dome, which separates the regions of light and life from the nether regions where the ideas gnash their teeth, is called the threshold.'

281. Now, all these figures resemble each other in the main features of their symbolism, and yet there are elements of difference worth noting.

282. First the resemblances. In the 'Field' we have the centre, or focus, and a limiting line around it, beyond which is unconsciousness. In

the 'Stream' we have the crest of the wave, the body of the wave, and a limiting line, or threshold, below which is unconsciousness. In the 'Dome' we have the summit, the area, and the base or threshold, below which is unconsciousness.

283. But each figure has, I think, a different shade of meaning. The 'Field' gives us an idea of limitation, it is the consciousness of the moment only, it is 'Mind *now*'; in the 'Stream' there is the suggestion of progress, from and towards; in the consciousness of the moment there is something of memory and something of anticipation; while in the 'Dome' ideas are ever surging upwards or being repressed—the Soul is 'the battle-field of contending ideas.'

284. To understand in what sense it is a battle-field we must come back to Professor Adams's analogy:

'The first time an idea passes the threshold into the dome, his chief care is to make acquaintances. For his only chance of gaining a footing in the dome is by making suitable connections. His conduct is like that of an ambitious young man on his introduction into society. He finds there ideas akin to himself, with whom he forms fast friendships; but, on the other hand, he encounters certain ideas utterly opposed to his style, and these do all in their power to expel him. An idea's first visit to the dome seldom lasts very long. He has few friends and many enemies; he soon sinks to the threshold, and passes out into a longer or shorter exile.'

285. And then he goes on to tell us how ideas, like people, form themselves into 'cliques,' which Herbart calls *Apperception masses*. An apperception mass is a group of ideas of the same kind, which is, as it were, on the lookout for a new idea

of its own kind, and is ready to seize it and welcome it into the soul.

286. Then we are told that the ideas in a 'clique' are very loyal to each other:

'As soon as one of them has crossed the threshold into the sunny land, his first thought is naturally to make for the summit, but his second is to drag with him those with whom he is more or less connected. He never seeks to push on to the centre alone.'

This part of the analogy is going to be very useful to us by and by, so keep it carefully in mind.

287. The notion that ideas are associated with each other is, of course, not new; and no doubt one has often, consciously or unconsciously, acted upon it in one's teaching. But upon the old 'association' theory ideas were like beads on a string, each following another with which it has been associated. Apperception means much more than mere succession. It tells us that to assimilate a new idea we need the help of all the ideas already in the mind, or soul, as Herbart prefers to call it.

288. Now you may ask, 'If an idea can only be assimilated by the help of existing ideas, how does knowledge begin? For there must be a first idea.' Herbart saw that. Like all psychologists, he brings knowledge to the soul through the senses. But in the combination of sensations into a percept he came up against something that could not be accounted for by any mere sense-process.

'This combination is only conceivable on the assumption of an existence other than the body, an existence which Herbart calls the "Soul."—*Felkin*.

289. The soul, according to Herbart, comes into the world empty; that is to say, the mind of the new-born child has no content of any importance. The production of a content begins as soon as the soul enters the body; it is supplied by the senses. But if the soul has no content, it has a power, a latent activity which it exercises on whatever the senses present to it. 'Man enters life a stranger. . . . Nature knocks at the door of the soul with stimulations of sensitive nerves. . . . The soul answers with sensations and ideas. . . . It masters the world by perceiving it.'

290. Perception, then, might be called the soul's response to the appeal of the senses. The response is spoken of as *reaction*; not the happiest term for us, perhaps, because we use it generally in a slightly different sense, yet easy enough to understand and adopt. But there is a further assertion which sounds more complicated. The mind reacts on the presented idea. *Having reacted on one idea, it reacts on the next in a slightly different way, because of the first reaction*; i.e. the presence of the idea that has established itself affects the mind's activity with regard to the next idea. In fact, every idea is worked up into the whole mental content so as to modify it to a greater or less degree; and the new idea itself is modified by its fusion or combination with the rest.

291. We might, roughly, compare this to cookery. The addition of each ingredient modifies the whole mixture, while each ingredient that is added loses something of the tang of its original

flavour, which is modified by admixture with the rest. Do we not see this happening every day? A boy grows up in a strongly conservative environment (or the opposite), and for a time reflects the politics of his family. Later, when he begins to read and think for himself, the youth imbibes ideas which—perhaps unwelcome at first—considerably modify those he has inherited, and may even give rise to enthusiasms of a different kind. But these new ideas are affected by the young man's early impressions and traditions, so that probably he is never, at heart, as thorough-paced a Radical (or Tory) as he thinks he is.

292. New ideas are not always received with enthusiasm. Every innovation in music has had to fight for its life. Among the traditional ideas in men's minds it found 'few friends and many enemies.' If it had sufficient vitality it leavened the lump sooner or later, but in the process of absorption may have parted with something of the offending flavour.

293. And then people forgot that they had ever opposed it.

294. We must not let the term Apperception *Mass* mislead us. One great difficulty in dealing with things spiritual is having to use language that is of the earth earthy. In choosing terms to describe mental happenings we are driven to make use of the everyday words that seem best to express our meaning. Our language is full of examples. We *see* the point of an argument, we *grasp* the meaning of a phrase, we are *hurt* by an unkind word, we *scent* the motive for an action,

we speak of *taste* in art and literature, and call a person's disposition *sweet* or *sour*.

295. Often, too, we describe certain sensations in terms which do not strictly belong to them. Musical sounds are not 'high' and 'low.' Vibrations are more or less rapid, and the resulting sensations of sound are more or less acute or grave; but when we call them high and low, we apply to one set of sensations terms which we generally use for quite another set. It is true that there is an analogy between the high and low of sight and the high and low of hearing, and perhaps the physical effort to sing 'high' sounds creates a further resemblance. Be that as it may, we find the terms used in both connections in several languages.* This being so, a series of lines rising like a ladder becomes a sufficiently suggestive symbol of that increasing acuteness in musical sounds which we call 'getting higher.'

296. The very suggestiveness of this symbol leads to another misapplication of a term. The word interval means distance. Now there is distance between any two lines or spaces on the Staff, any two points on the modulator, any two places on the keyboard that give us certain sounds. In these cases the word interval is rightly used. But between the musical sounds themselves there is no distance. *There is a difference between the ratios of the vibrations which give us octaves, fifths, etc.,* and this difference between the ratios we speak of as distance or interval only because there are distances in the symbols that

* The French, however, use the correct terms, 'aigu' and 'grave.'

represent them to our eyes, the spaces on the keyboard that we know by touch. So that here again we are describing one set of sensations—those of hearing—in terms of other sets—those of sight and touch. And we cannot help it; but if we remember these facts the conventional use of the term need not mislead us. *It isn't true*; but it is handy, and it works quite well in practice.* But to return.

297. The word *Mass* expresses pretty nearly the notion of a closely associated group, and need not mislead if we remember that ideas are not *things* but *processes*, *ways* in which the mind acts. Professor James objects to the term, his reason being that 'we can gain no insight into what really happens either in the mind or in the brain by calling previous experience and habits an apperception mass.' Perhaps not; but we get help in teaching, which is what we are seeking. What really happens is of primary importance to the psychologist as psychologist—for the teacher a general notion is enough, provided that it is not a misleading notion. We may *know* that there is no such thing as a *mass* of ideas in any mind, but if we act as if there were we get what we want—an intelligent reception of what we present. Professor James himself says, 'of course, it may upon occasion be convenient,' and that is all that is claimed. It is a convenient term, and for the average teacher comprehensible and workable.

* That is, in instrumental teaching. But when it comes to teaching *sight singing* 'by interval' it is another matter. The ear does not measure intervals, for an obvious reason. This, however, is not a subject for discussion here.